COCo Impact Inquiry Final Report- Summary
January 2011

Background

In 2010, after a series of discussions internally on the importance of reflecting on how COCo evaluates its work, Centraide du Grand Montreal was approached to fund an impact evaluation. We saw this work as connected to a prior organizational evaluation exercise which COCo did in 2002-2003. Given the time span since the last evaluation and significant recent shifts in the COCo structure culture and staff team, we felt that it was important to carry out the exercise once again.

We worked with Stephanie Garrow, a long-time COCo collaborator and faciliator of our 2002-2003 evaluation. The process was developmental, open-ended, using qualitative research methodology built around internal exploratory conversations at COCo, individual interviews, larger conversations with partners and a connection back to other lived experiences in COCo work which took place at COCo at the same time as the Impact Inquiry and were directly influenced by it. Data gathered through the Impact Inquiry has included individual qualitative conversation interviews with two dozen representatives of partner community organizations, a public event on the notion of social movement building and lived experiences by COCo staff in supporting social movement building work done by other organizations both here in Quebec, elsewhere in Canada, the US and the world.

This impact inquiry has allowed COCo to 1) reflect on the process of impact evaluation, 2) learn about our practice as change interveners with Quebec community groups 3) name priorities that we want to explore further in our work, and 4) appreciate the importance of reflecting on social impact and the need for critical analysis in community organizing.

This summary report shares key elements of what we have learned about evaluation and our practice. It also identifies the major priorities for future work. The full report is available from COCo (info@coco-net.org).

1) **What we learned about undertaking a developmental approach to an inquiry of the impact of community organizing work**

There is much activity in Quebec community groups around impact measurement, the power dynamics involved in carrying out such reflection and the range of tools that are appropriate for doing so. Other initiatives found elsewhere, such as the Building the Movement Project, aim to"strengthen the role of non profit organizations as sites of democratic practice and to advance ways non profits can significantly contribute to building movement for progressive social change."(www.buildingmovement.org).

As far as reflection methodologies and tools are concerned, the evaluation and research field is investing more and more energy into showcasing its newest approaches to measuring complex systems change (for example, social change) through approaches such as Developmental Evaluation[1]. These emergent reflections use strategies that reinforce the capacity of community groups to produce, themselves, social analysis on their own terms. Developmental evaluation, as an approach uses some of the following methods: 1) Real-time reflection that is utilization-focused and rapid, 2) Continuous generation and sharing of learning how to highlight the "situation in evolution", 3) Use of an insider-outsider expert evaluator who becomes a close member of the reflection team, and 4) Organizational reflection which is intentional in how it aims to develop something new (for ex: new structures, new program cycles, new tools, new strategies) to increase the learning around a complex situation. (Quinn Patton, 2008, Gamble, 2008).

Applying an emergent and developmental approach, COCo envisioned this as a collaborative project, a sort of ongoing *learning circle* bringing together COCo staff and board and community partners at different levels, using different methods. We wanted to see something that would be flexible, would redefine itself over its' evolution and connect to the following process values currently being promoted by COCo through its work: *iterative, co-creation, developmental, dialogue-centred and transformative*.

What we learned about organizational reflection and inquiry ……..

A roadmap is an attempt at defining the journey that lies ahead. Once we're on the road however, things never progress in quite the same way. This reflects COCo's approach of working with community groups. Sometimes, the stated need masks something much more urgent. Sometimes a facilitation intervention will allow for unexpected openings. The journey of this impact inquiry was no exception.

As a result of progressing through this inquiry, it became clear that the impact inquiry needed to adapt to the shifting realities of the organization and its constituents. Most significantly, the Impact Inquiry was affected by and in turn played a role in further defining COCo's strategic priorities - most notably our focus on considering/developing COCo's organizational commitment to social movement building and in promoting critical analysis of social change in community organizations.

The impact inquiry also shifted in response to an opportunity to "dove-tail" COCo's work with a public event that we hosted on the notion of movement building, as well as COCo's participation at an event on community-based approaches to evaluation organized by Centre de Formation Populaire.

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1 Developmental evaluation is outcomes-oriented in its focus and is particularly useful in situations where the outcomes are emergent and changing. It emerged as a niche for use in situations of ongoing development. It is particularly well-suited for helping to monitor the connections between short-term outcomes and longer-term social change efforts. Programs that do not expect to create a standardized model, but rather anticipate the need to be continuously evolving are examples where Developmental Evaluation is particularly useful. http://tamarackcommunity.ca/g3s61_VC_2010g.html

<u>Given the time frame of the impact inquiry (18 months), we noted the importance of having a small 'coordination team', with consistent and on-going participation, clear evaluation objectives and activities, a flexible implementation process and regular, shared documentation</u> .

Having one staff member coordinate the work was helpful to keep us focused on the process while continuing to run all of the COCo's programming. This role promoted "real-time" use of impact inquiry data and ongoing development of new organizational strategies as they were informed by emerging analysis of the data. This person constantly helped us make links to both the evaluation process and what we were learning in connection to the lived experiences we discussed at staff meetings, regular evaluation meetings of our programs and services and staff/board retreats.

Constant referral back to the impact inquiry objectives and re-working the inquiry process, based on regular and shared documentation, ensured we did not stray too far from the intent of the evaluation work. The use of google.docs as a shared, on-line platform to present raw data and initial findings/results statements between staff and Board greatly facilitated the "live nature" of our reflections. It also kept us 'moving along' in the process, despite pressures to put the impact inquiry work aside as other pressing organizational obligations were identified. Having on-going access to the progress and results of the impact inquiry helped the coordination team re-focus and re-prioritize the types of questions guiding our work to ensure that they were immediately relevant/useful to COCo's organizational needs at the time.

<u>Given the nature of an emergent design, we learned the importance of staff and board being comfortable with this type of process and the importance of having a skilled facilitator guiding the process</u>.

There was some confusion and mis-understandings during the process (e.g.: Staff/Board questioning "what was, and what was not, part of the Impact Inquiry process?"). There was some frustration that answers to evaluation questions were not easily available and that, even at the end, we had raised as many new questions as we had answers. Perhaps one of the challenges of this type of work is to imagine it, and then communicate it, as a continuum that does not necessarily end when the "formal" inquiry process ends. . This involves organizational commitment to follow through with further evaluation work.

2) **What we learned about COCo's practices**

The impact of COCo's work

a) <u>COCo is perceived as having an impact on groups' organizational health</u> by:

➢ Connecting people to capacity support and reducing isolation

➢ Helping groups become stronger, build sustainable structures and processes (inter-organizational communication, conflict resolution, planning and evaluation)

➢ Supporting individuals/groups to develop a language around what they do and where they are headed

b) <u>COCo adds value in the sector by</u>:

➢ In working with groups, drawing from our own model as an example in mirroring how to live social change values in organizational settings.

➢ Walking with groups using a flexible, sensitive, process-oriented, coaching based approach

➢ Regularly creating spaces for starting important conversations and facilitating knowledge creation

➢ Encouraging organizations to "get out of their bubbles and to meet and share around critical issues"

➢ Modeling and being seen as an expert in "peer learning". COCo experiments and takes risks for the sector to learn from

➢ Living and sharing an anglophone perspective in the community sector in Quebec is different and interesting for the francophone sector. COCo is seen as a "bridge" between linguistic cultures.

We also learned:

<u>Groups are motivated to work with COCo for the following reasons:</u>
- Driven by real organizational need or crisis
- COCo is perceived as conflict-resolver and provider of organizational development (OD) support
- Hub of resources and information
- Support to Anglophone, bilingual and ethnic minority groups
- Groups appreciate the critical social analysis which COCo provides

<u>About social justice and movement building work and how we approach it:</u>
➢ People's perceptions of social justice work is that it is very challenging, requires significant investment of time and depth of analysis and requires capacity building in their organizations and across organizations to be at the same level of collective reflection.

➢ There are gaps in critical thinking and action around social justice and movement building. For example: continual follow-up activity is needed, capacity building activities need to be able to connect to different experiences/ use of language.

<u>There is a role for COCo to play in bringing groups together to promote social justice</u>

This can be done through:
- Exploring improved "branding" of COCo's model as an agent promoting social justice work
- Enhancing knowledge in the sector about COCo's mission as a social justice group and in working with ethnocultural and francophone groups
- Increased work with large advocacy networks and umbrella groups
- Further connections and building shared agendas with regroupments
- Increase "meet and share" opportunities between groups (e.g. speed dating for social justice)
- Sharing analysis and evalution of what exists
- Flesh out the limits of what organizations can do alone, and what requires more collaborative efforts
- More clearly identifying steps required to carry out this work beyond organizational and membership boundaries.

<u>There is a desire amongst groups for COCo to host future conversations between groups to exchange about mission/vision/goals as they relate to achieving social justice</u>.

Specifically, it was noted that "Chaotic and tense conversations amongst actors with different interests can be a vehicle for powerful change".

<u>Shifts to consider in our model and practices</u> include: how to build community-based action research capacity to support existing and budding social justice movements, continuing with the creation of creative, appreciative, focused on co-creating spaces and tools for change work, considering empowerment paradigms (Bill Ninacs work), fuller use of the appreciative approach.

3) **Priorities for future work**

<u>For movement building work:</u>
➢ Building a common/shared analysis is necessary – especially one that starts with defining and fleshing out the current reality
➢ COCo can play leadership role in initiating research projects, and then sharing its research on the community sector as a starting point for presenting the profile of related issues and then carrying out a participatory analysis of what questions and membership needs community groups are grappling with (Listening Tour).
➢ Keep asking the hard questions about how groups carry out social justice work; in assessment and follow up evaluation work of contracts and events.

For COCo's work with organizations:
- ➢ Make a more explicit link to social justice work: in our public image ("branding"), with contract work (during assessment, doing the work and in the follow up evaluation process), and by holding more events (particularly smaller and e-vents) for strategic convergences.
- ➢ Carry out a Listening Tour (inspired by Highlander Research Institute).
- ➢ Explore the benefits of connecting to large *regroupements* and increasing the scope and depth of our advocacy work.
- ➢ Reach out to non-traditional groups (neighborhood coalitions, citizen groups and informal associations working on advocacy)

For evaluation:
- ➢ Share this evaluation process with funders, training partners and community groups.
- ➢ Conduct a 'similar but different' evaluation process in three years. Hang on to the idea of a peer-to-peer impact inquiry process approach.
- ➢ Continue using our ongoing evaluation processes when working with groups; implementing it more systematically.